

The Protean Narrator in Uwe Johnson's *Speculations about Jakob*

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Uwe Johnson has revealed that he began writing his first novel, *Speculations about Jakob* (*Mutmaßungen über Jakob* 1959), as a conventionally related narrative—in the third person, with events chronologically arranged.¹ When the material itself, so he contends, insisted upon being presented in a radically different format, he eventually produced a work of such stylistic complexity that the publisher felt obliged to provide readers with a plot summary. This article seeks to explore both the formal measures Johnson employed to evolve a multifaceted text, together with their origins, and the significance of these new dimensions in the structure of the contemporary novel.

The perplexing narrative stance Johnson has adopted in telling his story becomes evident on the first page because of its unusual typography. The narrator's voice, uttering a single sentence, is abruptly interrupted by what must be interpreted as a dialogue between two unidentified speakers; their exchange appears, however, without quotation marks or paragraphing. Rather, the alternating citations are introduced by dashes in the margin. This device recurs throughout the novel, with the notable exception of passages of dialogue contained in sections of extended narration where the punctuation, if only in regard to quotations, is conventional. Subsequent to this puzzling intrusion, the narrator proceeds with his tale; by omitting indentation, a capital letter at the beginning of the first sentence, and a period at the end of the last one he indicates that his report is imaginative, reverie-like, rather than factual. At the end of the second page (the eighth page of the book) Johnson introduces yet another subtlety in format, a passage in italics—short in this instance, but followed almost immediately by one several pages long. Readers can readily persuade themselves that they are being made privy to the thinking of one or another of the characters the narrator has implied are involved in the unriddling of his opening statement: "But Jakob always cut across the tracks."²

The purposefulness of this kind of narration comes gradually to light as readers piece together the bits of information contained in these fragments of text, which are presented without narratorial guidance. Johnson has indeed acknowledged that reading *Speculations about Jakob* requires the same amount of effort as he put forth in writing the book.³ The title itself represents a touchstone by which

¹ Cf. Michael Roloff quoting Uwe Johnson, "Gespräch mit Uwe Johnson," in *Ich überlege mir die Geschichte ... "Uwe Johnson im Gespräch*, ed. Eberhard Fahlke (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1988) 178.

² Uwe Johnson, *Speculations about Jakob*, trans. Ursule Molinaro (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963) 7. All subsequent references are to this edition and appear in the text.

³ Arnhelm Neusüss quoting Uwe Johnson, "Über die Schwierigkeiten beim Schreiben der Wahrheit," in *Ich überlege mir die Geschichte ...* 185.

these narrative devices can be tested, for they create not an account of the protagonist's (that is, Jakob's) life, but, rather, a series of speculations about it. These evolve from conversations about him and his untimely death, presumably—on the basis of speculation—as the result of an accident; the ambiguity of the cause which brought about his being run over by a train on tracks he routinely crossed is never allayed. On yet another level of meaning, the significance of the symbolism that Johnson employs in his text—the fog which permeates the scene of the accident—not only makes somewhat plausible Jakob's erring onto the train's path, but also serves to underscore his confusion in confronting the existence of two Germanies—the major theme of the *Speculations*.⁴

In addition to the dialogues between Jakob's close friends and acquaintances about their relationship with him, the narrator provides the reader (or listener, since oral transmission of text plays a prominent part in the narration) with monologues by three key characters—Gesine Cresspahl, Herr Rohlfs, and Jonas Blach—in which their inner thoughts about Jakob are revealed. In *Ich überlege mir die Geschichte* . . . Johnson avers that he decided to abandon his attempt to narrate in a conventional fashion and began to introduce radical narratorial devices at the point in his story when Rohlfs begins to set in motion the machinations which constitute the novel's plot (178). As an important figure in the DDR's state security service, Rohlfs must withstand being categorized by readers either as a villain or as an overly conscientious devotee of the principles of European socialism. In short, Johnson set out to make Rohlfs human. By suspending narration and borrowing from the realm of the theater the device of the monologue, Johnson allows a character generally perceived to be unsympathetic to step up to the footlights and explain himself (not unlike Shakespeare's Richard the Third).

The tendency in contemporary fiction to employ features of the drama in the place of narratorial commentary has its origins in the disenchantment which novelists were beginning to have with their role as omniscient narrators. Prominently, Flaubert and, next in order, Henry James set limits on the storyteller's knowledgeability; the narrators in their fiction restrict the information they supply to that available, as a rule, to only one of the characters, notably one who cannot be aware of how the story will end. The aim of writers of fiction who make use of the "point of view" feature in their storytelling can be most readily related to their endeavor to produce a narrative which will be perceived to be truthful, that is, true to life.

Setting limits on the author's knowledgeability, Johnson has proposed: "The author knows the story [only] from the outside, and one might say that the author works together with his characters."⁵ By allowing his unidentified narrator to absent himself and Rohlfs to take over his role, in the sense that he acquires direct access to the reader, Johnson seeks to make plausible his convoluted plot, which resembles to a considerable degree that of a "spy" novel. On the lookout for people who work in West Germany but have close ties to families in East Germany, the ever-inventive Rohlfs plans to entice Gesine Cresspahl, a NATO employee, to en-

⁴ Cf. Kurt Fickert, "Symbol Complexes in *Mutmaßungen über Jakob*," *The Germanic Review* 61.3 (Summer 1986): 105-08.

⁵ Neussüss quoting Uwe Johnson, "*Ich überlege mir die Geschichte* . . ." 191; my translation.

gage in espionage for her former homeland. In a series of monologues spread throughout the story, Rohlf's delineates the course of events which his undertaking initiated; like the conventional narrator, he has the advantage of hindsight since the novel begins after Jakob's death, its culminating event.

Precedent for the novelistic use of the reflective monologue in the strict (theatrical) sense of the word occurs most notably in the work of James Joyce. Although Johnson has made passing references to Joyce, he has been careful to acknowledge, rather begrudgingly, the influence of William Faulkner on his choice of unconventional narrative devices, so prominent in *Speculations about Jakob*.⁶ The close association of the function of the monologues in this novel with those in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* cannot be gainsaid. Dramatically, Faulkner begins telling his story with the voice of a mentally incompetent child-man; as this figure incoherently recalls events in his childhood, the reader can only speculate about their true nature. Faulkner then adds accounts of the same set of circumstances by two other speakers, less muddled, but decidedly prejudiced, before he allows a narrator to bring the story to a close.

In essence, Johnson, like Faulkner, calls upon the readers to participate in evolving the narrative's twists and turns by adding their own speculations to those of the characters. Principally, they are compelled to try to identify the speakers in the interposed monologues and dialogues. (The English version makes their task less onerous by introducing each monologue with the character's name.) Rohlf's plan to entice Gesine into becoming a spy for East Germany has its origin in his interest in Jakob Abs, a train dispatcher who, in his devotion to his job and the state he serves, stands out as an exemplary citizen of East Germany. Both Jakob and his mother, who played the roles of adoptive brother and mother to Gesine during the Russian occupation, become pawns in the development of Rohlf's plot. Since the head of the state security agency assumes that they will be eager, or at least willing, to help persuade Gesine to betray the secrets of an alliance of capitalistic governments, he seeks them out and presses them to bring Gesine back into the East-German fold. Upon being approached by Rohlf, Mrs. Abs immediately decides to flee to the West; in his loyalty to the state for which he works, Jakob at least initially accepts its need to engage in espionage.

Appropriately, Johnson allots Gesine a number of monologues almost equal to that of Rohlf's (18) because of the significance of her part in the story. As is the case with Rohlf's, Gesine's role is an ambivalent one. Somewhat like Caddy, the sister figure in *The Sound and the Fury*, Gesine reveals little about her emotional life despite the opportunity afforded by her having direct contact with the reader. (Caddy, however, is afforded no such advantage by Faulkner.) The political stance which Gesine exhibits in her self-revelations is decidedly apolitical and individualistic, that is, impartial in regard to favoring either of the two Germanies; she concerns herself principally with maintaining her integrity. This trait she has in common with Johnson himself. Instead of revealing the reasons for her surreptitious and unanticipated visit to East Germany, she tells in her monologues the story of her relationship with three East-German men: Jakob, her father, and a

⁶ Cf. loc. cit. 211, where Johnson acknowledges the influence of Faulkner in general terms.

suitor, Jonas Blach. Like Rohlf's, they all represent various aspects of a divided Germany.

Cresspahl is for Gesine not only the father but also the fatherland—home. But the Germany to which he belongs no longer exists, except as a Janus-faced memory, evoking a sense of security and a sense of dread. Only in the monumental novel *Jahrestage* (Anniversaries), written and published years later, in which Gesine is the central figure, does Johnson advise readers that Cresspahl himself probably engaged in espionage for the British during the Second World War. Readers can but surmise that Gesine's brief reunion with her father comes about because of her need to know why he has chosen to stay in the East; she herself, after all, has fled to the West, mistrusting the sometimes oppressive policies of the communist state. Johnson leaves unanswered—except for readers who can readily draw conclusions—the question of whether or not Gesine ultimately decides to become a spy for East Germany. She acts in a puzzling manner, abruptly returning to the West, but then, after Jakob's death and under suspicious circumstances, going through with a prearranged meeting with Rohlf's in West Berlin. Her monologues provide no enlightenment on this subject and little on the subject of her love affair with Jakob on the occasion of his fleeting visit to West Germany.

Her feelings toward Jonas Blach, an "assistant professor" at the university in East Berlin who had met and fallen in love with her before her defection to the West, also remain unexplored in *Speculations about Jakob*. However, Johnson has elevated Jonas to the position of an important character in the novel by allowing him to replace the narrator and represent himself in a series of monologues (fifteen in number). Like Rohlf's, he argues for his political point of view rather than for the way he conducts his relationship with Gesine. In explaining himself, Blach speaks for the East-German intellectual; the role he plays in the novel resembles to a considerable degree that played in actuality by the gadfly Wolfgang Harich, keeping the socialist government of the German Democratic Republic alert to its tendency to slip into the fascist mode. By refusing to flee and thereby avoid arrest because, as he has foreseen, his criticism has forced the Russophiles in the East-German government to react and press charges against him, Jonas reveals himself to be martyr to the cause of maintaining the antifascist principles on which the German Democratic Republic was founded. In sum, the three characters (Johnson prefers to call them persons) with whom he has supplanted the narrator by way of allowing them to address the reader directly serve to delineate three divergent approaches to the problem of being a German in a divided Germany; Rohlf's gives his complete loyalty to the state he believes to be truly democratic, that is, belonging to the people, existing solely for the sake of its citizens (not for the military/industrial complex as in the West). Gesine has been disillusioned in her expectation that East Germany can be such a state. Jonas refuses to relinquish the hope that it can.

The device of presenting unidentified characters in conversations—some, it becomes apparent, over the telephone—affords Johnson the opportunity to let subsidiary characters present opinions relevant to the novel's theme without the intrusion of even the narrator's "he said/she said/so and so said." The words stand by themselves; unitalicized, they represent speculations on a strictly oral level. Constituting slightly less text than the monologues do, the dialogues (distinct from

those in the narrated portions of the story) show the narrator once again in the guise of the playwright. As though on stage or in a film, the speakers accelerate or impede the course of events and embellish the speculations about Jakob made by Gesine, Jonas, and Rohlfs as they give voice to their thoughts.

The anonymity of the speakers is not undermined by the fact that the context of what they say often indicates who they are. A case in point would be the initial segment of dialogue written by Johnson without quotation marks or narratorial clues. Rereading this passage after one has worked through the first and second chapters will allow one to assume that in this instance it is Jonas questioning Jöche, an engineer and Jakob's close friend, about the circumstances of the accident (if it is such) which has cost Jakob his life; however, it is the substance of the dialogue and not the identity of the speakers which is significant. The voice of the witness can be heard in this exchange, sounding more than a bit like Brecht's Mother Courage or the good woman of Sezuani; it is the voice of troubled and hard-pressed humanity itself (notably, Brecht named his character "der gute Mensch").

Against this theatrical or motion-picture background of close-ups and panoramic views, of feature and bit players, Johnson sets his impartial narrator who reports on the last days in the life of Jakob Abs and the dilemma of a righteous man in unrighteous times. The storyteller, representing Johnson (called in contemporary literature on the topic of narration the implied author, that is, the author of the particular book in question), cannot in all truthfulness introduce Jakob's views on the situation; he begins his narrative pointedly when Jakob lies dead, beyond his reach. He can only add his own speculations about Jakob to those of the other characters, becoming one of them himself. (In *Jahrestage* Johnson, the implied author, depicts the real author Uwe Johnson who plays a small part in the story.) In bringing the story to a close, the narrator, who has played many parts, leaves his audience to determine for themselves the true nature of Jakob's death. It could have been the result of a tragic accident: confused by the fog and in a state of mental turmoil, disillusioned by a state becoming fascist and yet unable to abandon his loyalty to the people in that state, Jakob leaps from the path of one train onto that of another. The supposition that he may have done so deliberately remains an option. The seemingly farfetched supposition that Rohlfs has arranged the traffic pattern on these tracks on the occasion of Jakob's suspiciously abrupt return to East Germany and his work must be given at least some consideration; it would be pertinent in regard to a reading of *Speculations about Jakob* as a spy novel. Johnson has contended himself that, in the final analysis, the book constitutes "a discussion with the reader"⁷ and thus identifies his intent in devising a modern, multilayered text to be a matter of involving readers in finding a solution to the problem he presents. He confronts them with the question of whether or not it is possible to maintain one's integrity in a corrupt world.

While Hetty Clews does not deal directly with Uwe Johnson in her discussion of narrative devices in contemporary literature, *The Only Teller*, she reaches conclusions through a discussion of the work of Faulkner and others who influ-

⁷ Christof Schmid quoting Uwe Johnson, "Gespräch mit Uwe Johnson," in *"Ich überlege mir die Geschichte . . ."* 254; my translation.

enced him which tellingly apply also to Johnson. "There is a rare kind of novelist," she proposes, "for whom rhetoric is more appealing than psychology. Such a novelist creates fictive speakers primarily as multipersonal expressions of his own distinctive voice."⁸ Johnson speaks from within that group of twentieth-century writers who hold that authorial omniscience as a manner of telling a story jeopardizes its truthfulness and therefore its effectiveness. In order to achieve authenticity, a narrative must forego being told from the vantage point of a storyteller who exists like God outside of time. Considering the philosophical basis on which the very art of narration rests, Arthur C. Danto has posited: "The door of the future is closed, and knowledge of it is a dead option, and this is what makes narration possible and all that narration presupposes: the openness of the future, the inalterability of the past, the possibility of effective action."⁹ These presuppositions would seem to be an integral part of the fiction of *Speculations about Jakob*.

⁸ Hetty Clews, *The Only Teller* (Victoria, B.C.: Sono Nis Press, 1985) 16.

⁹ Arthur C. Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) 363.